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U.S. Stationed A-Bomb Ship 200 Yards Off Japan's Coast;
U.S. Ship Holding A-Bombs Hugged Japan's Coastline

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Former senior U.S. government officials acknowledged yesterday that the U.S. Navy "permanently stationed" a ship carrying nuclear weapons 100 or 200 yards off the Japanese coast for a period of time that ended in 1961.

The disclosure of the stationing -- in violation of the mutual security treaty governing U.S. deployment of nuclear weapons in Japan -- comes in the midst of a political crisis in Japan caused by the recent revelation that U.S. warships routinely carried nuclear weapons into Japanese ports for 20 years.

The Navy ship anchored off Japan was ordered to leave by top Pentagon officials in the Kennedy administration, who allegedly had been tricked by the Navy into believing that the service had no nuclear weapons in what were legally Japanese waters or territory.

The story was outlined by Daniel H. Ellsberg, a former Department of Defense specialist on nuclear command and control systems, in a "memo for the record" he dictated in 1971 -- the year in which he also released the "Pentagon Papers" on the war in Vietnam. The Washington Post received a copy of the memo from Ellsberg.

Confirmation of the disclosure came from two former officials after key portions of the memo were read to them on the telephone by a reporter. The officials, who played major roles in the episode in 1961, are Paul H. Nitze, who was assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, and U. Alexis Johnson, who was deputy undersecretary of state for political affairs.

"I certainly remember the episode," Nitze said. "There was quite a flap about it." He said, however that he "can't remember all the details."

Johnson said that to his knowledge, no Japanese ever raised a question about the vessel, an LST (landing ship, tank) that, according to Ellsberg, "had the cover mission of being an electronic repair ship."

The Navy refused comment. A spokesman said that as a matter of policy the Navy neither confirms nor denies the presence of nuclear weapons at any location. Retired Adm. Arleigh A. Burke, who was chief of naval operations at the time, acknowledged that "my memory may be faulty," but said, "I don't remember anything like that at all. I think I would have remembered it because it was a very important thing."

The ship was positioned just offshore of Iwakuni where it could quickly provide nuclear bombs for a handful of Marine Corps aircraft based there with purportedly marginal war missions, Ellsberg wrote.

In line with the LST's cover, the memo continued, "it was not jsut in the 3-mile limit, it was actually anchored 100 or 200 yards offshore. It was virtually on the beach at Iwakuni. By any standards it was stationed on the territory of Japan."

Johnson said that he had a report on the LST from the U.S. Embassy in Japan and took it up with Nitze. At the time, the ship was in Okinawa for repairs. Both men recall that the Pentagon, then led by Robert S. McNamara, ordered the ship to stay in Okinawa.

By contrast, Ellsberg's account says that McNamara had ordered the withdrawal of the LST, but -- to avoid a fight with the Navy -- had withdrawn the directive. McNamara, who is president of the World Bank until July 1, was out of the country and could not be reached for comment.

In a dispatch from Tokyo this week, Washington Post correspondent William Chapman said that an admission that nuclear weapons had been brought into Japanese ports probably would topple the government of Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki.

The political crisis began when former U.S. ambassador to Japan Edwin O. Reischauer said earlier this week that U.S. warships have carried such weapons into Japanese ports routinely for 20 years.

In the 1971 memo, Ellsberg said that some Japanese high officials at least tacitly recognized an exception to the treaty that U.S. aircraft carriers making occasional rest-and-recreation or other brief stops in Japanese harbors could have nuclear weapons aboard.

". . . By something of a tacit agreement, even the left in Japan had not made a major political issue out of this," Ellsberg wrote.

Ellsburg said the Navy engaged in what he denounced as "the most fantastically irresponsible action it was possible to imagine" in stationing the LST at Iwakuni. He said the Navy claimed to the defense secretary's special assistant for atomic weapons -- the

official "in charge of knowing the whereabouts of every individual nuclear weapon in the world" -- that the ship was stationed in Okinawa.

Just when the ship was first stationed there is unclear, although the LST apparently dropped anchor no later than 1959. Ellsberg's memo said the Navy sought, by its action, to circumvent the policy without the Pentagon's knowledge, to conceal a violation of the security treaty, and to give Marine Corps aircraft a nuclear-bombing head start over the Air Force.

Johnson said his recollection is that the issue was resolved by the Pentagon without difficulty. There was no indication last night that anyone had been disciplined as a result of the episode.